

Special Transylvanian Games and Toys

Abstract

The author treats the play culture of Hungarians from Transylvania. First of all he talks in detail about some Transylvanian toys made of a special material and about some interesting popular card-games. In the introduction we have a short history of the research, then the presentation of two toys made of mushroom (the raw material of the tinder ball and of the tinder mouse is *Tinder fungus, Fomes fomentarius*) and several not or barely known card-games which are parts of some customs. The explanation of rules is completed by allusions to the social environment, to the functions of mentioned games, to their role in the community. For example it is mentioned that one card-game (*asszonyfogás* 'women's capture') is one kind of communication which is above languages: playing this card-game one greets and talks to the other gypsies speaking different languages but knowing this game in the same way. So this card-game is one expression of their affiliation to the same great community.

Introduction

There are considerable gaps especially in the field of research on the games of adolescents and adults. However, the world of the games of bigger children and of grown-ups is also a rich and interesting field of research. In what follows I will make a presentation of games other than children's games in the first place. I will approach my subject matter by examining more deeply a certain segment of it.

Can the Hungarian play culture of Transylvania – I'm thinking here of both traditional and less traditional games – be considered a special one nowadays? I think yes.

There are a great variety of peoples and languages in this area, and this has an impact on the world of Transylvanian games as well. That is why, for instance, people from the mother country find it peculiar when they hear of Szeklers playing *ojna*. *Ojnă* is the name of the popular sports-game – a kind of *méta* (ball-game) – played especially by Romanians in our region. I mentioned thus a sports-game, but I don't intend to dwell on this topic. In the first place, I would like to speak about a few special Transylvanian toys made of special material as well as about some popular card-games.

Playing is an ancient and universal characteristic not only of man but also of many other creatures. Its importance is indisputable, although this is not always reflected in research. Most of the time the concept of the game was identified with the concept of children's game and this decreased the interest in it (Niedermüller 1990: 531), contributing to the fact that so far folklore studies have focused on children's games.

One of the best-known old books, in which we find data about Transylvanian games, is Péter Apor's *Metamorphosis Transylvaniae* from 1736. The scientific research started in the 19th century. In the first volume of the *Collection of Hungarian Folk-Poetry*, published in 1872, already appeared popular games, among them the Nativity play ("betlehemes") from Csíkszék (collected by Balázs Orbán). The first volume of collections on Transylvanian popular games, Ferenc Török's work entitled *The Szekler World of Children after One Thousand Years* was published in 1896 in Saint George. Elek Benedek published Szekler Children's Songs and Game-Songs and Puzzle Stories already in 1882 (together with Jób Sebesi), his bigger collection was published in 1898. Áron Kiss's *Collection of Hungarian*

Children's Games from 1891 is of major importance; this is the only complete monography on games up to now.

The research on children's games and on popular games in general doesn't have its proper theoretical and methodological frame; it is mainly restricted to publication of data. The research on the Hungarian tradition of games is characterized by serious lack of proportion. For instance we have a considerable amount of collected material in the field of singing and dancing games but there were hardly any publications on popular card-games for a long time... In our century the first sign of a qualitative change in this respect is represented by Mária Kresz's general work published in 1948. This was followed – in respect of publication because the material is earlier – by József Bakos's work entitled *Children's Games from Mátyusföld* which has as its worthy and successful Transylvanian continuation Klára Gazda's book entitled *The World of Children from Esztelnek*, published in 1980.

Games and mushrooms. Toys made of tinder

Not a very long time ago, in 1994, appeared Lajos István's interesting little book, called *Children instruments from Korond*. This book it is about instruments made of different materials, especially about ones made of tile, considering that Korond (Corund) is the famous village of potters.

In this zone called the Salt zone (Sóvidék), there exists a unique folk trade called *toplászás* ("tindering"). The people dealing with tinder make the toy from their own special material. Mice and even balls are made of beech-tinder (*Fomes fomentarius*).

Adolescent girls and boys play with the mouse. It was often utilized in the *fonós* (social gatherings when people spinning and entertainment went together). Today boys use it in balls. They scare the girls with that. They try to throw the mouse into the girl's blouse. This kind of playing has another aim, too. It helps them get closer to the girl they like, because they try to get the mouse out from the girl's blouse after throwing it in; slowly, patiently, not to hurt the girl, but continuing dealing with her. If the girl, after trying to look angry, decides to put the mouse on her blouse, this is considered a victory; it shows that this game is not only one which needs materials and demands skill – it is not only a devilry, as I heard from the 90 years old Vince Máthé – but it's also a kind of mate finding game, a funny game. It would be interesting to find out if the pine-cone-mouse from the Museum in Szolnok was used for the same purpose as the tinder-mouse. The making of the mouse is a playful work for the tinderer. They don't sell them for much money, but they usually make many of these cheap articles. This is a good opportunity for the tinder to be used, so, this way nothing is thrown away.

Vince Máthé and his daughter, Julianna, explained the making of the mouse. The exterior of the mouse-body is made of the pickings of the tinder; the interior is made of clay brought from the watercourse. This is burned out. There is a form (a casting mould), the mouse is made out of clay, and they put the *topló* (tinder) on it. The moustache is made of human hair or out of goat hair. It is stamped with glue. The dry clay is burned in the oven. The tale is made of rubber (from the tyre of the car). An ironed yellow rag or tinder it is glued to the inferior part of the mouse. While the metal (the clay) it is still raw, they put the pin in. When the mouse is ready they curve the base. They draw the eyes with "dukó" paint, which is on a matchstick. They make more glue with flour and water.

The tinder ball (*toplólabda*) is also a toy made of beech-tinder. This is made only of mushrooms, not like the mouse. Tinder balls are no longer made. They consider that it is a waste of material, and it isn't worth making it. A woman from Zágon (Szeklerland, county of Covasna) told me in 1992, that she once got a tinder ball from her grandfather. I asked a lot of people in Korond if they still make tinder balls and usually I got negative answers. The oldest tinderer, Vince Máthé remembered that in the time of the rag balls they used to make tinder balls, but only then, never afterwards, except those, which were made for me – having this unique opportunity - by András Molnos. I tried them with his grandchildren. It is a good feeling playing with that ball; it feels good to touch it. But their time is over. Children no longer

play with it, modern balls replaced them, and the tinder is used for other purposes. Nowadays it is an interesting museum piece, which when touching it feels like velvet.

Games of Cards from Transylvania¹

The game called *filkó* is the most important traditional game in my hometown in Aranyosszék. It competes with the American seven (*hetes*) and the game called sixty-six (*hatvanhatos*). The event to which it is linked is the carnival. The *filkó* from Aranyospolyán it is usually played at carnival. Sometime the *filkó* could have been a game of keeping awake, of the watcher as in Kalotaszeg and Udvarhelyszék (Székelyderzs). The games for keeping you awake were played on the Hungarian speaking area, but we also know that Romanians from Bihar (Bihor) also used to play it (Ujváry 1982: 145-153). Until now only Imre Katona (1962), Klára Gazda (1980) and Zoltán Vasvári (1996) were the ones who dealt with card-games. The latter speaks about card-games in his book *Card-game in the 20th century in peasant culture*.

The elementary use of cards is for fun, for playing. The card-games were once war games, like chess. Especially the card-games in which hands are important kept this feature. The *filkó* is also a war game between city and town, peasants and lords. Maybe because of this characteristic the ladies were not allowed to play cards for a long time. Some games are played even today only by men (in Aranyosszék the twenty-one, on the Nyikó's Valley the *filkó*, on the Kis-Küküllő's Valley the so called one-hundred-two). The spending of time is an emphasized role of this card-games (*filkó* and twenty-one). Both of them belong to well defined – in some cases ritual - times, occasions (carnival, watcher). The passion for the game is not very important, because they are played especially on some events. This is also proved by the fact that these games are only played in winter, when there is less work on the fields. The *filkó* was often played when someone was travelling. This became a habit among those who were often travelling, among the commuters. The influence on social life, social gatherings are important in this game as in the twenty-one too. The ones who play are friends or relatives. We know games were the players belong to different groups, they even do not know each other. The game which is played by the gypsies in Sepsikőröspatak is a kind of touching, a net system of signs above language beyond language, named *asszonyfogás* 'catching the woman', it's a game of understanding each other between gypsies. István Pakulár was telling that if in Hungary different gypsies meet in a place, they all play this game because they understand it better than any other language (they know, they speak).

The feeling of fighting for the prize remains true for the *filkó* and the twenty-one. Who plays cards well and who works hard: they don't exclude each other. Moreover, the man who is at the same time good, hardworking and a good player is more appreciated. The one who is a good mate in the game can also be a good mate in working. The fun and competition can be more exciting when there exists some punishment for the one who loses. The one who loses in Csíkszentimre has to put on a hat. In Székelyderzs (Dirjiu) the losers knock on the table to the servants mentioning to them that *they should take the kids out*, because they were disturbing the game. In the case of *dura*, who had it, was cleaned on the hands, and they used to make him nervous by cleaning, rubbing the table.

In a closed place (train) the one with the switched hat was the loser, if we look – for example- at the players from Szolokma (near Szováta / Sovata), where they played one-hundred-two (Péter Jakab informed me, a 42 years old worker in 1997).

The estimation of the *filkó* and twenty-one lately has changed in the studied communities. The games, which make life easier, are more, are highly appreciated. The fortune-games are not so much liked (see the case of the twenty-one). Still, the latter is more common (more popular) than the *filkó*. Because the *filkó* is the old generations' game, and

¹ Zsigmond 2000

the younger generation are not given the opportunity to learn the game because first of all the TV took the place of the card-game.

A new research –from 1998 – shows us, that the *filkó* is played near Torda and Aranyosgyéres (Turda and Campia Turzii) by Romanian workers.²

Let me tell you some details about *filkó*. I couldn't find the description about the Transylvanian *filkó* game not even in the Encyclopaedia of Playing Cards (Berend 1993). It's not the same as the games named in those books: the upper (*felsős*). It differs a great deal from those. In our playing the lordship must be achieved; to be not a servant you have to have more than two tens and aces at the end of the hand. The one, who did not take, did not catch anything, that's the "suszter" ('shoemaker') he is not only a simple servant; this is the worst possible defeat (In Bogdánd it is *puszta*,³ in Derzs it has a "dura" as they say).

This is a game with tricks (hands), in which the most precious card is the "*filkó*" (the ranking is: clubs, green, red, diamonds; each of them is considered a trump), the further order is: ace, ten, king, queen, jack, nine, eight, seven. It is not obligatory to beat. Colour requires the same colour, if one doesn't have any, then he has to put a trump). The trump is determined by the one who has a bigger 'binding' (*kötés*). The word means: "*filkó*" or more *filkós* ('queens') and other cards of the colour required by the trump. The binding (*a kötés*) is determined depending on the number of trumps in someone's hands, if this person says the trump; and depending on the smallest card that he has of this colour. For example, if someone has three red ones (the smallest is jack), two *filkós*, then the name of his binding is: five jacks (*öt alsó*). Binding is possible only if you have a *filkó* and a *farba* in your hand. *Farba* means that the player cannot have only trumps, he cannot have six bindings. He has to have at least one card (one or more), which is not part of the binding, and this is the *farba*. That person who has more bindings determines the colour of the trump and he can call for help by naming one card. Who has the named card will be the help (*segítség*) of the caller; they will make –together with the binder (*kötő*)- the town.

The other three players represent the village (*falu*), which has to fight against the town (*város*). The one who doesn't take the three tens (ten is considered the ten-card itself and the ace), becomes the servant (*szolga*) and the other one becomes the lord (*úr*). Then the servants have to take at least six tens and aces to free themselves. Until then – as a punishment – they mix and they divide the cards. They have to give three-three cards twice - in the direction in which they stir the samp (the hominy)-, the player before the divider has to cut. This game is played – with Hungarian cards, but they don't use all the thirty-two cards. At the beginnings of the game they take out two sevens (they show which two), they won't use them further on. It is usually played by five players, but it has a version, which is played by four or three players (at Székelyderzs even with six or eight players). In the version with four players the ones who sit opposite to each other form a team and they have to take as much as possible together. *Filkó* in three means that the fourth player is not a person, his cards are put in one heap and they take out of it one by one when it is their turn. The *putyi* or *mutuj* (at Aranyosszék he is called 'the dumb' (*néma*), in Kalotaszeg *mutyi* in Máramaros *vak* 'blind', at Derzs in Udvarhelyszék *sánta* 'lame') is always with the binder, with the town. In four or in three they use only 24 cards, taking out the sevens and the eights. At Csíkszentimre and in the villages around, according to Sz. A, who used to play *firkó*, as they call it, only the game in four or in three is known.

The 'fresh' (*frisselés*) is played only by the best *filkó*-players. This can be announced only after dividing the three cards in a game of five (at Székelyderzs only that one can play 'fresh' who is not a servant, *who doesn't have kids*, who took at least three tens). In such cases all the three cards only after that). They have to start with a trump. In some *filkó* or ace is taken with a bigger *filkó* and there at the beginning the *filkó* doesn't take.

The Transylvanian *filkó* is known in Aranyosszék, Kalotaszeg, Udvarhelyszék and Csík as well. As far as I know, it is not known in Háromszék, and there are no recordings in

² The *filcău* is played mainly while waiting (while doing nothing in particular). The the terms of the cards are directly translated from Hungarian into Romanian.

³ Informant: Sipos László (1948).

Máramaros either (see Vasvári 1996: 122-123); I cannot speak about the situation in other regions because of the shortcomings of research.

The feast of the *filkó*, the celebration with playing the *filkó* is the carnival.⁴ At such times people didn't only get dressed and wore masks, surprising especially their relatives, but they also went to one another to play games. Better said, to play *filkó*. At least they used to ten-twenty years ago. Nowadays playing *filkó* is no longer so well known, it is played not so often. Instead, they play the seven, the sixty-six or in recent times the 'calf' (*bornyú*, *borjú*). Or they just chat, eat and drink. The elderly people like playing *filkó* nowadays too. In the meantime they have a talk, which gets more and more intense while playing. In order to reach the goal, they often use tricks, which are punished, condemned other times, but in such times they are only disapproved but tolerated. They even say that in this game you are allowed to cheat, if you do it unnoticed, while in chess or in twenty-one you are not. This aspect strengthens the celebrating feature of playing *filkó*. As an exception, what is forbidden in other times is allowed in carnival time.

Over the past decades the opportunities of celebrating together with the relatives have become more rare. We can say that it is only the baptism, the confirmation, the wedding and the funeral that brings relatives together. And of course the carnival *filkó*-game, when they mixed, divided the cards until "they smelled of garlic" (expression: 'for a long time'). However, they didn't get bored about it. Various, colourful, funny and mocking arguments made the game even more entertaining. Most of the players want to be with the town, if so, it is more likely for someone to become a lord. However, most of the time they support the village, especially if its members fell down, became servants and now they are trying to set themselves free.

Playing the game means the time of celebration: that of freedom, it spices up the common weekdays, works off the tensions of hard work and helps to overcome the troubles. Consolation, encouragement is never missing. *Unluck in cards, luck in love. Don't worry, maybe it will be better for you! This servantry is just a game! Don't give up, Abrincs! Look, Násztászia plays well, she just doesn't have luck!* Of course, there is no *Abrincs*, no *Násztászia* among the players, but they can have a good laugh at these names.

Among the feasting players there are men and women too, mixed up, adults most of them. They let bigger children play this game so that they should learn the *filkó*, but not the cheating. They almost never play until late into the night. They say, they have to feed the animals the next morning, they have to get up in time.

In Aranyospolyán / Poiana-Turda the *filkó* used to have its prime time about thirty years ago, when there were no or hardly any TV-sets. Especially since Hungarian channels could be watched on television, the *filkó* has been played more rarely and as a consequence the opportunities, which used to strengthen up and make people aware of their relationships, friendships unfortunately have become more rare too.

I prepare the ending of my paper by mentioning one of our dramatical carnival games. We have data about it especially from Csík. This is a game of competition. It is not hard to guess the names of the heroes. At Epiphany it is 'Spoils king (*Konc király*) that wins, on Shrove Tuesday it is *Cibere* (one kind of soup without meat and fats) voivode. The spoils means juicy bone and it is usually to wrangle over. *Cibere* is a sour soup made of fruit and bran eaten during the Lent. Making the meanings of the words clear, guessing the word puzzle may have helped to a better understanding of the custom. It happens so in the case of language or literary games and puzzles.

We know the authors of one part of our language and literary games. I would like emphasize the name of János Arany and of Frigyes Karinthy. However, many language and

⁴ At Székelyderzs they used to play cards a lot in the *fonós* (social gatherings when people spinning and entertainment went together). I quote B.B.: *In carnival time they used to go to the fonó, until Shrove Tuesday. We went in turn to the neighbourhood. After playing the filkó, before going home we didn't miss to talk about politics, about farming and to chat for a while. The participants used to eat and to talk together – they often cooked corn -, they played cards, they wore masks. At this time men and women, boys and girls used to play cards too. During the last week, when finishing the spinning the women played night music for men.*

literary puzzles appear as a genuine folklore creation: without name. Those who popularize them don't know their authors and they have no intention of clarifying the question of publications, of smaller or bigger collections of language-, literary or logical puzzles. Most of the time the border is not clear between popular and not popular games of language and literature (at least from the chosen point of view). That's why I end my paper on special Transylvanian games with a few puzzles, which are in some way connected to Transylvania.

Literary picture puzzles. You have to attribute a word, or words to the picture or drawing or to the elements of the picture or drawing so that the word or words would result in the solution of the puzzle. In the case of a literary picture puzzle most of the time the title of a literary work is hidden on the picture. You have to give the title of the literary work and the name of the author!⁵



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